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Drawing on brand loyalty can help ensure your company's survival | Opinion

By James S. Cassel
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It's going to be a long winter. Even with a successful vaccine, normalcy may be as far away as next summer.

Middle market companies can learn from a recent CBS news story about the famous Strand bookstore in New York City. The struggling independent bookstore turned to social media to highlight its economic plight, successfully

motivating a cavalry of support from loyal and new customers, and even some celebrities. With many businesses facing tough choices right now, finding new ways to tap into customer loyalty and secure new clients, while keeping people comfortable doing business with you, is critical to survival and success.

Here's what to consider:

IS THERE A PATH FORWARD?

Most middle market businesses have already belt-tightened on their expenses, sought capital, and right-sized. Now, it's once again time to project revenues, expenses, and capital needs for the next six to 12 months and pursue any existing government aid, or new aid that might become available. If you do not see a clear path forward, seek a buyer or a capital partner now. Do not wait. If selling is the only option, position your narrative to explain why your business is a good opportunity. An investment banker can help.

Middle market businesses that do have a path to survival should focus on actively engaging consumers, building client confidence, and tapping into brand loyalty.

Invest in resources that make consumers/clients feel safe doing business with you. Retail outlets and restaurants, for example, can put up plexiglass dividers, secure air purifiers, and/or Far-UVC lighting that may curtail the spread of COVID-19. They should also coach staff on promoting and maintaining social distancing, create or beef up delivery/pickup services, and of course, wear — and even provide — masks and other PPE to employees, guests and customers. Some businesses can set up tents and move merchandise into the open and would do well to invest in outdoor kiosks, awnings and umbrellas, as well as fans or heaters, and move business outside.

You can make other strategic moves, too. Review your product/services line and tailor them to pandemic needs. Seek accommodations with landlords who would rather have some rent than none at all. You can engage real estate consultants to assist in negotiations, while seeking concessions, and also consider collaborations or partnerships that might help.

Most important, do not underestimate the power of drawing on brand loyalty. Like The Strand, use social media and other channels, such as customer lists you may have built, to call for action and help, letting your customers know how much you need and appreciate them. Explain how buying local means

revenues stay local, so getting goods and services from you means supporting their community. They will want you around when things get back to normal.

HOLIDAYS MATTER

Many businesses secure a disproportionate amount of their business during the weeks before the holidays. Get ready now. Use messaging to let customers know about the range of extra measures taken to keep them safe. And with many retailers and online businesses already offering bargains, run your own deals now too.

This next COVID phase may be the most challenging yet for business owners. While many middle market companies have already implemented or exhausted traditional cost-cutting and capital-raising efforts, more can be done to keep loyal customers returning and maybe even gain some market share as we get to the other side of this crisis.

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